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Transitioning from special school to mainstream college: experiences of young autistic people

Autistic children and young people often find transitioning difficult in everyday life, for example moving from one activity to another in a classroom. I was curious to explore how young people who had been educated in small, personalised special schools, experienced the transition to larger, less personal colleges of further education.

According to [Ambitious About Autism \(2011\)](#) fewer than one in four autistic people continue their education beyond school so it was clear that further research was needed in order to understand why this was the case.

How the research was carried out

The young people in transition were at the heart of this research and for that reason methods were developed to take account of potential communication difficulties. An '[interrupted interview](#)' method (Shepherd, 2015) was designed which used card sort and collage apps on iPad's, as well as walking interviews at college. The walking interviews enabled the student to literally take the lead and show the interviewer the areas of college they visited on a regular basis and take photos of places liked or where they felt less comfortable.

This more embodied interview experience allowed for a less intense experience and offered a physical representation of how included the young people were whilst also discussing other aspects of their life at college. The research was carried out over a year at home, school and college.

Key findings

The findings demonstrate that young autistic people share some of the same aspirations and concerns as their typically developing peers. Some key findings included:

- Young autistic people seek, enjoy but struggle with social interaction.

'It's mostly the social and friends side of things which I'm finding really hard. I keep trying to talk to people but everyone's always in groups and I often feel that they're leaving me out and then I get really worried that I've said something wrong'. Beth

- All the young people talked about their social interactions online and offline.
- Young people and their parents needed support during and after transition on the road to a more in(ter)dependent life. Taking account of this relationship between independence and vulnerability was crucially important for parents, their children and the staff at college.

'he's so behind, he's very socially and mentally behind in his age so it's going to be very, very hard, it's like sending a 12 year old to college.' Parent

A college tutor shared parents' concerns about the future for their children beyond education:

'I have sat with parents and cried you know because they've come in and we've talked and I've ended up in tears with them...what is the answer for these young people? What are they going to end up doing? Where is the net that will hold them?'

There were positive outcomes for some, David talked about 'preferring' it at college as: *'there's a café down there and you don't have to do as many hours [as at school]'*. Jake went on to succeed in his Level Three course and secured an IT apprenticeship.

Recommendations

The research suggested some clear recommendations for improving the transition process including:

- involving young people more in their own transition planning.
- paying attention to the social needs of young autistic people specifically in relation to peer interaction
- time management – managing unstructured time during the day and the long summer holiday periods
- using a peer mentoring approach with autistic students starting college
- ensuring parental involvement so that young people are supported to be interdependent.

Further research into social motivation and peer support during transition would be very beneficial as would the implementation and evaluation of specific interventions in further

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education colleges. These transitions to college also need to be seen as part of the broader picture of emerging adulthood.

Further reading

[Ambitious About Autism \(2011\) Finished at School. Where next for young people with autism? London: Pears National Centre for Autism Education.](#)

Shepherd, J. (2015) *'Interrupted interviews': listening to young people with autism in transition to college.* The Warwick Research Journal, 2 (2). pp. 249-262

[Shepherd, J. \(2016\) 'Hopefully if I like get the right support at college, I'll be able to like find my way and all that if you know what I mean?' Experiences of transition from special school to mainstream college for young people with autism. Doctoral thesis \(PhD\), University of Sussex.](#)